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Race For Life

Ron Jackson

More silently than God can form a droplet of dew upon nature's carpet of grass, she steals from her sanctuary of forest cover to the exposure of the meadow. Driven by the soft twinges in her stomach, the oft-reported, ritualistic quest for nourishment is foremost in her mind.

Slowly and cautiously she moves, but her ordinarily nimble and featherlight footsteps feel clumsy and seem to echo in her ears like spring thunder. As the gentle summer breeze bathes her world in its fresh warmth and erases the wispy, leftover clouds of the day, she silently wonders, "Why do I have these feelings?" and "Why should this night seem so strange?" I come here often to gather the wild berries and drink the cool water of the springs, but never have they tasted so sweet as tonight.

In her feverish attempt to quench the gnawing pains of hunger, she eats and drinks far more than the norm...as if her body was crying for extra nourishment to complete some unknown, not yet run, race for life. Now, the lank feeling of hunger is replaced by the uncomfortable feelings of overindulgence that can only be cured by relaxation and the passage of time.

As she lies down on the soft, warm earth, painted silvergray by a crescent moon and uncountable stars, she notices the faint flickers of lightning. It seems to be in a far-away land, where the evening sun falls from the heavens each day. In the stillness, the great horned owl, circling above, causes his shadow to sweep silently across the grass-tops, like the razor-edged scythe of the reaper. Only in this solitude does she notice that the pain does not abate but is more intense.

Suddenly she remembers that today's meal included not only the tender young shoots of several pokesallet plants, but also six or seven of the luscious, green may apples that grow so well in the low spots near the river. Taught by her mother that both plants can be toxic at certain stages of their development, she wonders if, in her haste for nourishment, she might have gotten careless and overlooked one of her lessons of survival.

As the pain becomes more and more severe, she begins to balance on the edge of consciousness, and knowing the harshness of this largely unsettled wilderness, she battles with every fiber of her being to remain lucid and alert. The simple act of breathing is now transformed into what seems to be a laborious task. Her mind tells her body to relax, exhale the air in her lungs, and don't expend the effort to refill them. It would be so easy, just to drift off into the oblivion of the hereafter...

Keeping the senses sharp is becoming more and more of an effort, and she knows that the loss of this battle in which

she's now engaged would probably be her last upon this earth. The conscious mind can only withstand so much and then a being's existence is passed to the hemisphere of the brain that controls the last fortress of defense...the subconscious. As her mind passes through this portal and back, time after time, she finds it more and more difficult to separate fact from fantasy. Is this what it feels like to die? Should there be this unbearable pain? The old ones had always said that dying is a wonderful trip to a land far away, but this is far from being a beautiful transition. Her pain is now so intense that her mind begins to beg for the peace and tranquility that death will surely bring.

Just as the sun rules the day and the moon governs the night, an all-seeing, omnipotent God allows no creature to suffer beyond its limitations of endurance. No exception is made in this case, and as the long painful night begins to give way to the first silver light of daybreak, she quietly slips into the waiting arms of a dreamlike world. A dream of a meadow, freshened by the morning dew...a meadow with long, cool shadows, created by the first rays of a newly risen sun...a meadow soft with the sweet smell of summer flowers and the songs of waking birds...a meadow which, in its enormity, still embraces the small, spotted creature with huge ears, bulbous brown eyes and a wet nose, lying beside its mother.

In a short time, when she's standing and the small newcomer is nursing at her side, she will suddenly realize that life and death are only separated by a hair's breadth, and that all creatures are born to die. This day has been kind, and rather than leave the world, she has brought it new life. It is a good day.

